

watching through windows, you're wondering if i'm okay by elsaclack

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (before the epilogue scene), F/M, Fluff, Gen, Missing Scene, Mostly Fluff, Originally Posted on Tumblr, Reunions, You've been warned, a dash of angst, after The Job Is Done, but not explicitly written, if u know what i mean, it's basically after the events of the last ep, mileven is the main pairing, s2 spoilers, the others are vaguely hinted at

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

The whole house is quiet, the echoes of Billy's barbaric screaming long-since faded away, but when Mike closes his eyes and inhales deeply enough, he could swear he still smells the faintly tangy scent of whatever that gel was in El's hair, the one that filled his lungs when he breathed her in. He can still feel the heat of her against him, the way her heart beat so hard and wild against his chest, the way her nails dug into his shoulders through his sweater when he'd hugged her as close and as hard as he could. He can still feel her, alive and breathing, *real* and *there*, even though it's been a couple of hours and he's had as many brushes with death in that time. The anxiety still bristling in his stomach roars and doubles over on top of itself, threatening to buckle his knees and bring him to the floor for a moment.

It's the memory of those headlights flaring to near blinding proportions that keeps him steady on his feet. There's no way that was anything but Eleven.

The aftermath of the group's collective brush with the Mind Flayer and his army.

watching through windows, you're wondering if i'm okay

Author's Note:

Hiiiiii please be gentle this is my first Stranger Things fic and I'm HECKA nervous about it

I just finished my second rewatch of the second season and I'm so shookt to my core that I like,,,,,,couldn't not write this. Basically it's just a soft missing scene after Eleven gets the gate closed. Bc I like.....Needed It.

Billy is gone by the time they get back to the Byers' house.

It registers faintly in the back of Mike's mind, the tiniest of blips on his internal radar set off only by the dried blood smeared on the linoleum floor and staining a few pages of the map Will drew. He sees it without really seeing it, just as he hears Steve cursing out on the front porch without really hearing it. The Byers' house is a general wreck - just as it was about this time last year - and distantly, Mike wonders how long it will take to get things back in working order this time around. Last year it took nearly two months to get that hole in the front wall fixed.

"Mike!" He nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of Dustin's straining voice, realizing with a start that he'd frozen in the middle of the living room to stare at that spot on the wall. He turns at once, finding Dustin and Lucas just seconds away from bowing beneath the weight of Steve's sagging body, struggling to amble through the doorway. There's a flash of red over Steve's shoulder - Max - and then Steve curses again, louder than ever. "Little help here?" Dustin pants.

Mike darts forward at once, muttering a half-hearted apology as he grabs Lucas' arm and pulls. Lucas comes unwedged from the doorframe at once, sending him stumbling forward, but before he can completely wipe out and bring the rest of the group down with him Mike steadies him. "The couch, the couch," Lucas grunts, nodding his

head toward the couch beneath the broken window.

It seems whatever adrenaline had Steve firing on all-cylinders earlier has dissipated; his grasp on consciousness loosened considerably on the drive back to the Byers' house, leaving him all but collapsing into the couch. He moans into the cushions, eyes closed and rolling beneath his eyelids, and as the boys step away he flings an arm over the side of the couch and waves his hand vaguely toward the kitchen. "Somebody get him some water," Dustin gasps, reaching up to push his curls away from where they're matted to his sweaty forehead.

Max darts away at once, her long hair flying out behind her like flames out of a tailpipe, and at the sound of running water from the kitchen, Mike backs away several more paces. Anxiety is a real and living thing inside his chest, prickling and bristling uncomfortably, his heart all but in his throat as he begins to pace. Somewhere out there in Hawkins, Billy is stumbling home with his non-existent tail between his legs. Mike hopes his whole body aches.

"Shit. *Shit!*" Dustin's leaning over Steve's legs, his breath fogging the one in-tact window. "How are we the first ones back? Shouldn't they be back by now?"

"Who?" Lucas asks.

"I don't know! Any of them! *All* of them!"

"We weren't even gone for that long, Dustin!"

"Well, it shouldn't be taking this long!" Dustin shoves away from the couch as Max hurries back into the living room clutching a glass of sloshing water.

"How long do you think it *takes* to beat a shadow monster? Or to close a giant gate to the upside down?" Lucas demands. Mike inhales sharply, shakily, and lets his eyes briefly slip shut.

"I don't know!" Dustin shouts. Steve groans again, louder this time, and Mike glances over in time to see Max struggling to keep the glass of water balanced in one hand while trying to haul Steve into a seated position with the other. "Maybe we should go back out there

-”

“No, no, no -” Steve slurs loudly, now fully seated on the couch. “*None* of you little *dicks* are leaving, never again, you hear me? We’re all staying right here until the adults come back, and that’s *final*. ”

“Relax, no one’s going anywhere. Don’t get your panties in a knot.” Max says, unimpressed. Steve rolls his eyes and takes the glass from her hand, pulling a long swig.

“Not that you could stop us,” Dustin mutters. Steve lurches forward at once, water splashing up over the edge of the glass as he takes a messy swipe at Dustin’s side. “Kidding! I’m kidding, sheesh, chill out!”

“I’ll use the damn bat if I have to,” Steve mutters as Max pulls the glass out of his hand, falling back into the cushions, his eyes shining with seriousness even through the bruising still blossoming across his face. “You’re all staying on the bench like good little shitheads. Got it?” From his peripheral vision, Mike sees Dustin and Lucas exchange a look, but they all begrudgingly murmur their assent. “Wheeler, you got it?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Mike mumbles, gaze fixated on the ground moving beneath his feet.

Steve sighs loudly, but something about the aura rolling off of Mike in thick waves must keep him - and the others, for that matter - from saying anything else. The whole house is quiet, the echoes of Billy’s barbaric screaming long-since faded away, but when Mike closes his eyes and inhales deeply enough, he could swear he still smells the faintly tangy scent of whatever that gel was in El’s hair, the one that filled his lungs when he breathed her in. He can still feel the heat of her against him, the way her heart beat so hard and wild against his chest, the way her nails dug into his shoulders through his sweater when he’d hugged her as close and as hard as he could. He can still feel her, alive and breathing, *real* and *there*, even though it’s been a couple of hours and he’s had as many brushes with death in that time. The anxiety still bristling in his stomach roars and doubles over on top of itself, threatening to buckle his knees and bring him to the floor for a moment.

It's the memory of those headlights flaring to near blinding proportions that keeps him steady on his feet. There's no way that was anything but Eleven.

Actual headlights suddenly flash along the back wall, streaming in through the window over Steve's head. At once they jump into action, Dustin and Lucas hauling Steve up off the couch, Max diving onto the cushions to peer through the shade, Mike darting to the front door. In retrospect flinging the front door open before checking to see the source of the light was probably not the smartest move on his part, but in the end it doesn't really matter; he rushes out to the front steps in time to see Mrs. Byers putting the car in park, Nancy's door already thrown open, Jonathan and Will just barely visible in the shadowy backseat. "*Will!*" Dustin and Lucas shout simultaneously, rushing past Mike and Nancy alike toward the Byers' car.

"Is he okay?" Mike asks Nancy as she draws closer to the porch.

"Yeah," Nancy breathes, casting a glance back at the car over her shoulder as she ambles toward Mike. "We got it out of him."

Mike glances down on instinct when the charm on Nancy's necklace winks as it reflects beneath the faded front porch light - though her coat is wrapped around her and zipped halfway up her torso, he can see the clearly-defined ring of sweat where it soaks into the soft pink shirt she's wearing beneath it. "Are you okay?" he asks a little more quietly, gaze flicking back up to Nancy's face.

She seems disproportionately caught off-guard by his question. "Yeah?" she stammers, folding her arms over her middle. She's weakly feigning defensiveness, but Mike sees right through it - his sister is shaken, deeply. It's in Mrs. Byers' eyes, too; it's in the tight grip Jonathan has on Will's upper arm. Nancy ascends the first step and then shuffles to the side, allowing enough room for the Byers family and Dustin and Lucas to make their way inside. Briefly, Will's gaze connects with Mike. Their smiles are exhausted and tight, reflected back in perfect sync as they pass. "What about you?" Nancy asks softly once Will is past. "Did Steve keep things under control?"

Mike bites down on the inside of his cheek, hard, vividly recalling the stench of gasoline and the way those vines convulsed when they were

engulfed in flames and the impossibly strong coil that wrapped around his leg and the way d'Art's roar made his ears ring when he was standing that close. The way Steve seized him round his middle and practically hurled him up through the hole Hopper dug, the way he'd lifted Dustin off his feet to keep him from being swept away by the pack of demodogs when they'd gone running by. "Yeah," he hears himself mumble. Nancy's skeptical face comes swimming back into focus. "He protected us."

"Protected you?" she repeats, looking for the first time to be coming out of whatever shock she'd gone into in Hopper's cabin. "From what, exactly?"

Wind rustles through the trees around the driveway, tall and ominous shadows towering around them, and somewhere off to his right a twig snaps. In all likelihood it merely broke underfoot of a deer or some other harmless little thing; after the last few days, it's enough of a siren to send the Wheeler siblings scrambling up the stairs and into the Byers' house, Nancy slamming the front door behind her and leaning back against it to sigh in relief.

The living room seems more alive now, Dustin and Lucas hovering behind Jonathan as he eases Will down into the easy chair in the corner while Mrs. Byers frets over Steve, who Mike is fairly sure has never looked more relieved to be in the presence of an adult as he does in that exact moment. Max stands in the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, looking to be torn between watching the two groups, before glancing at Mike and Nancy with an almost helpless look on her face.

"Steve?" Nancy gasps. Mike jumps backwards, allowing her enough room to dart toward the couch. "Oh my god, what the hell *happened* to you?"

"My brother," Max answers quietly from the doorway. "My step-brother."

"Billy," Steve clarifies when Nancy opens her mouth to ask.

"What - wh-" Nancy can't seem to decide who to question, turning erratically on the spot between Steve, Mike, and Max. "Will someone

please explain what the hell happened here while we were gone?"

Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Steve all begin talking at once, their voices melding together into one loud and abrasive sound. Dusting and Lucas gesticulate wildly, acting out the fight, while Max points at the sedative on the counter and Steve gestures to Max. "Okay, alright, everybody just calm down!" Mrs. Byers suddenly shouts, her voice somehow louder and stronger than any other in the room. The others fall quiet at once. "Jonathan, take Will to his room -"

"No, mom, I'm fine " Will calls weakly.

"I know you are, baby, but you've been through a lot tonight and you need to rest."

"I don't wanna miss anything -"

"I promise you, we will catch you up on everything that happened tonight when you wake up again, okay? I just need you to sleep for a few hours, and then we'll tell you everything. Deal?"

Mike thinks that it really must be a testament to how thoroughly that shadow monster wrecked Will's body that Will nods without any further argument and allows Jonathan to lift him up out of the seat and carry him away toward his bedroom; he's not sure that he's ever experienced anything that left him so weak that he couldn't argue his bedtime with his parents.

"Now," Mrs. Byers says once Jonathan has returned. "I want you guys to tell us what happened here, calmly and quietly, one at a time. Steve?"

Steve shifts on the couch, wincing as the ice pack resting against the side of his face rubs against a tender spot. "Well, uh, we were - we were just waiting, like we were supposed to, and I was trying to help Dustin preserve one of those dog things or whatever -"

"Demodogs," Dustin interrupts, exasperated. "Oh, yeah, uh - there's a demodog in your fridge."

"What?"

“It’s an important scientific discovery, we *have* to preserve it!”

“It’s *in my fridge* -”

“I’ll help you get it out later, Mrs. Byers, I’m really sorry - but anyways, the kids started talking about trying to help El-Eleven - her name’s Eleven, right?”

He looks to Mike for confirmation; Mike clenches his jaw and nods once.

“They were trying to figure out a way to help Eleven get to the gate, and they started talking about the map and the hub and setting shit on fire -”

“You set something on *fire*?” Nancy demands, rounding on Mike at once.

“Technically *Steve* was the one who *started* the fire -”

“I was trying to stop them - I swear to god I was gonna stop them - but then Billy showed up looking for Max.”

“I don’t know how he found out I was here,” Max says, her voice small, “but when he showed up I knew he was gonna kill me. He doesn’t like me hanging out with Lucas.” It’s strange - her voice is just as small, but there’s a fierceness to it now, a fierceness in the way she holds Lucas’ gaze when she glances and finds him already looking at her. “He got inside and started attacking Lucas, and then Steve stepped in and...well, he kinda got his ass kicked.”

“Only ‘cause Billy cheated,” Lucas supplies quickly. “He broke a plate over Steve’s head.”

Nancy and Mrs. Byers gasp in tandem, both women turning toward Steve at once. He’s already waving them off. “I’m fine,” he mutters, eyes on Lucas. “Just glad I got the brunt of it and not that twig over there. He would’a snapped in half with the first hit.”

Lucas smiles a bit sheepishly, stumbling slightly when Dustin lightly punches him in the arm. “Billy ended up on top of Steve,” Max continues, “and he was just...punching and punching over and over

and over again. So I grabbed the syringe and I stabbed him in the neck with it. And then I told him to leave us alone.”

“We left him passed out right there,” Dustin points to the spot Mike noticed when they first arrived back, to the spot where Billy’s blood - likely mixed with Steve’s - is smeared along the floor. “I guess he came to after we left and then went home. He was gone when we got back.”

“I was unconscious,” Steve says, “and these shits dragged me out to Billy’s car and they drove us out to the pumpkin patch where the chief dug that hole.”

“We didn’t really give him a choice about it,” Lucas says apologetically. “He was trying to stop us the whole time he was awake. It’s not his fault.”

“You - you guys went into the tunnels?” Mrs. Byers asks.

For the first time since starting the story, none of them speak; instead, they all nod, each of them with varying degrees of trepidation. “We knew setting the hub on fire would distract the shadow monster and would draw all the demodogs away from the gate,” Mike says quietly. Some thick knot is lodged in his throat and it’s hard to speak around, hard to breathe around.

“Eleven needed our help,” Dustin explains softly. “And when a party member requires assistance, it’s the duty of the party to provide that assistance.”

Another quiet moment passes in the space between heartbeats.

“You set the hub on fire,” Mrs. Byers says slowly, “and...it drew all the - the demodogs to you?”

They nod.

“Do you think - d’you think maybe it summoned that - that *thing* out of Will, too?”

Mike furrows his brow, carefully noting the way Nancy seems to shift, dropping her gaze to her feet, crossing her arms over her

middle again. She's the image of complete and utter discomfort, probably reliving whatever they witnessed in that cabin again in vivid technicolor.

"We saw it leave his body," Jonathan says gruffly from his spot in the doorway, answering their unvoiced question. "It came out through his mouth like this black tornado and then went straight through the front door, just before the lights flared -"

"Wait, the lights flared?" Mike interrupts sharply. Every eye in the room turns toward him. "Our headlights flared, too."

"D'you guys think that was Eleven?" Dustin asks.

No one answers.

"What happened after you set the hub on fire?" Mrs. Byers asks once the initial swelling discomfort has passed. There's an odd amount of desperation to the way she asks the question - like she's desperate to keep the conversation moving lest they lull themselves into a trap.

"We started running," Dustin says, gaze far away. "We ran as fast as we could, but then Mike fell -"

"I was *tripped*," Mike corrects, feeling a weirdly heated blush blossom across his face. "One of those creepy vines grabbed me by the ankle."

"I cut the vine with the bat," Steve says quickly, reaching on instinct to grab Nancy's wrist when she seems to be on the verge of panicking. "It only had him for, like, ten seconds at the absolute *max*."

"And then we ran into d'Art," Dustin murmurs.

"I'm sorry, *who*?"

"D'Art, it's short for d'Artagnan, a character from *The Three Musketeers* -"

"D'Art is the demogorgon Dustin adopted after he found it in his trashcan." Lucas interrupts wearily.

“I didn’t know he was a demogorgon!” Dustin yells over Nancy, Jonathan, and Mrs. Byers’ combined shouts. “He was just a baby when I found him, I thought - I dunno, I thought he was some kind of reptile or something! It was an honest mistake -”

“Anyways,” Lucas says loudly. “Steve cut the vine thing that had Mike, and then we turned around and ran into d’Art.”

“Dustin distracted it with some candy bar -”

“Nougat, he likes nougat -”

“- and then I got everyone back to the entrance and got Max, Mike, and Lucas back above ground,” Steve presses on, shooting Dustin a dirty look before turning his attention back to Mrs. Byers. “I guess the shadow monster figured out what Hopper and Eleven were doing, ‘cause they ran right past me and Dustin.”

“When we got out of the tunnels, the headlights flared.” Dustin says. “And then we came back here.”

Mrs. Byers nods, brows drawn together, gaze far away even as it fixates on a spot on the floor in front of her. “And - and none of you have heard from Hopper?”

“Not since he left with El earlier,” Mike says as the others shake their heads. “Have you?”

“I talked to him after we got the monster out of Will,” Jonathan says, “but it was only for a second. I couldn’t tell what was going on.”

They all fall silent, each wrapped up in their own trains of thought. For a moment, Mike deliberates the logistics of running straight through the front door and tearing through the woods until he reaches the lab; it’s dark enough that he could do it, that he could just blend right into the shadows in the woods and avoid the sharp beams of light from their flashlights while sticking close to the railroad cutting through the Indiana wilderness. He considers it, but only briefly; he considers it, and then the thoughts vanish altogether.

Because there’s another pair of headlights now shining through the window behind the couch.

It only takes a split-second for Mike to leap into action, once again flinging the door open without so much as a glance through the peephole and all but hurling himself out onto the front porch. He flies down the steps and across the gravel driveway, recognizing the mass color to be Hopper's police car. Somewhere behind him familiar voices are shouting, calling something he thinks might be his name, but he can scarcely hear them over his own heartbeat roaring in his ears. There's movement in the car, a shape too big to be anyone but Hopper tilting toward the driver's side door; there's a much smaller shape sitting motionless in the passenger's seat.

"El," he hears himself gasp as he wrenches the passenger's door open. Her face is the only thing in his vision that is in focus; everything else around him fades away. Her head is tilted back and to one side, her eyes closed, her mouth just barely agape. There's dried blood caked along the skin around her mouth, appearing to originate from both nostrils, and the skin around her eyes is dark and almost bruised-looking - much the same as he remembers it being a year ago, right before she disappeared. "El, oh my god, *El*," he can hardly bring himself to touch her, terrified that she might disintegrate in his hands at the slightest pressure, so his hands flutter over her arms and shoulders a bit uselessly.

"Move, kid," Hopper grunts, gently-but-firmly nudging him out of the way and stepping into the space beside her side of the car. Mike stumbles back at once, his gaze never once wavering from El's face even as his back hits something warm and solid; the hands that land on his shoulders and gently squeeze tell him that he's just backed into Nancy. Hopper ducks further into the car and unbuckles El's seatbelt before lifting her up just the same as Jonathan lifted Will, backing away from the car carefully to keep from hitting her with any part of the car, before turning toward the Byers' house quickly. "Door, door, door," he chants under his breath, a manic gleam in his eye as he hustles toward the house.

Mike's not positive, because he takes off after them at once, but he's pretty sure Nancy closes El's car door.

Steve has vacated the couch, leaned against the wall now, looking far more aware of what's happening before him than he did when he first collapsed into that couch. His eyes are wide and nearly bugging

out of his head as Mrs. Byers quickly arranges the throw pillows on the far end of the couch to cushion El's head. Mike hardly spares him a glance as he rushes to the couch, reaching out to grab El's ankle as Hopper eases her down onto the cushions and Mrs. Byers arranges her so that her arms aren't bent at any uncomfortable angles. Hopper seems to be on a mission, his sole focus on El and what she needs, lumbering off into the kitchen as Mrs. Byers smooths the one errant curl that fell loose from the gel's hold away from El's forehead and Mike shuffles closer on his knees, switching his tight grip from her ankle to her hand.

Hopper comes back with a wet dishcloth folded into a relatively narrow rectangular patch, laying the cool cloth over El's eyes, smoothing it down more carefully and gently than Mike's ever seen him do anything. "Hop," Mrs. Byers says softly, watching him work. "Is - is she -"

"She's okay," he mutters, and a relief stronger than anything Mike has ever known surges through him at once.

"Did she do it?" Dustin asks almost breathlessly. "Did she close the gate?"

There's a muscle twitching in Hopper's jaw. "Yeah." he grunts after a moment. "She got it closed. She did it."

This time, Mike can feel the relief ripple through the entire group.

"So what's wrong with her?" Steve asks uncertainly.

"It's like you guys said last year," Hopper gestures to Dustin and Lucas, finally tearing his gaze away from El to glance at Mike. "It took a lot of power, and she's drained."

The knot in Mike's throat has grown bigger, so instead of attempting to speak, he just nods and rubs the pad of his thumb over El's knuckles. Her skin is warm to the touch. He finds that if he focuses on that, the knot in his throat isn't quite so painful.

Slowly, haltingly, Hopper tells them his story. He tells them about the box in the woods, the Eggo's, the look of desperation on El's pale and

sallow face after a month alone in the bitterly cold Indiana winter. He tells them about their rules and about El's mounting restlessness, all while studiously avoiding Mike's gaze. He tells them about how El disappeared, about their fight and how he wasn't there to protect her, about the nice man with the big truck and El's Mama. For the first time in his life, Mike sees that old grizzled police chief cry, and even though it's a slow and quiet thing he just can't bring himself to look longer than a second.

He focuses instead on El's face - the part that he can see - and how peacefully serene she is asleep on the couch.

"It was unreal," Hopper says softly. He'd taken the easy chair a while earlier, apparently content to leave her with Mike. He's staring at the ground but he's miles away, likely back in that lab, down in the basement, on the threshold to the upside down. "Those demodogs were everywhere and I was shootin' 'em down as fast as I could but I was runnin' out of bullets and...well frankly, I wasn't sure if I was gonna have enough to last however long it took her to get the gate closed. But then -"

He stops suddenly, jaw clenching, eyes closing, head shaking. "What?" Dustin asks, riveted. "What happened?"

"I don't know what went down in that classroom last year before she disappeared," Hopper mutters after a long moment. "I know it was intense, and I'm sure you kids were scared out of your minds. But that - that was *nothing* compared to what she did down in that basement."

The house is quiet, nervous, waiting.

"Her feet left the ground, Joyce," Hopper says quietly, lifting his head to steal a long glance at Eleven. "She was floating, *literally floating*, and - and *screaming* - and that monster was reaching for her but she blew it away, it was the most terrifying thing I've ever - I can't even *begin* to describe it."

El's hand is loose in Mike's, but that doesn't stop him from squeezing harder, from covering the back of her hand with his free hand.

“But she got the gate closed?” Mrs. Byers asks, carding her fingers through El’s hair.

Hopper nods.

“So...so that’s it, then?” Jonathan asks after a long moment. “Will’s okay and the gate is closed...”

“What about the demodogs?” Dustin asks quietly.

“Dead,” Hopper mutters. “All of ‘em.”

“It’s over,” Nancy murmurs. “It’s really over.”

As if on cue, the phone in Mrs. Byers’ bedroom begins to ring. The rest of the group springs into action at once - Mrs. Byers and Hopper take off toward the sound as movement ripples through the rest of the group, each of them tensing and darting forward before stopping in their tracks. It’s almost like they don’t quite believe that it’s really over; like if the phone rings for too long, the shadow monster will sic the demodogs on them and the world will finally fall apart the way it’s been trying to so vehemently for the last year. Mike huddles down closer to El, squeezing her hand, waiting for the anxiety pulsing in his chest to ease.

The ringing stops, and the tenseness in the room seems to dissipate slightly. “Jesus,” Steve mutters, reaching to crack his neck.

“Should we start cleaning all of this up?” Nancy asks, gesturing to Will’s map where it’s still spread across the floor and stretched along the walls.

“No,” Hopper’s voice is ragged from down the hall, sending another ice-cold shot of anxiety through Mike’s veins. He comes lumbering around the corner with Mrs. Byers at his side, hands held aloft, gesturing for everyone to stay where they are. “No, no, we need to keep everything exactly the way it is. Backup’s almost here, finally.”

“We could get the shed cleaned up, though,” Mrs. Byers murmurs, tilting her head toward the back of the house.

“And we need to get Eleven out of here. I have to stay, though - is

there anywhere -”

“She can come to my house,” Steve offers. Every eye in the room lands on him at once. “My parents are out of town, and I doubt these military guys will wanna come looking through all my shit. She can stay there ‘til things clear up.”

For a moment, Mike expects Hopper to shut Steve down, but to his surprise, Hopper nods. “Yeah,” he mutters, nodding his head. “Yeah, that’ll work.”

“I’m staying with her.” Mike says, watching Hopper’s reaction carefully. He almost levels the threat bubbling up in his chest - the dare for Hopper to tell him no - but Hopper surprises him once again.

“I think that’d be a good idea,” he says, looking from Mike to El. “She’ll be scared if she wakes up in a place she doesn’t recognize, it’ll be good for her to be with someone she knows.”

Before Mike knows it, he’s in the backseat of Steve’s car, El’s head resting against his thigh, Steve peering at him through the rear-view mirror. “We’ll call you when they’re gone,” Hopper says to Steve through the open driver’s side window.

“Be safe.” Nancy says to Mike.

Mike nods, and then Steve’s pulling the car around, kicking up a towering cloud of dust behind the car as he speeds down the road away from the Byers’ house.

The ride to the Harrington’s is a quiet one, marked by the quiet staticky radio and the occasional quiet snuffle from El. Mike mostly watches her sleep, only lifting his head to glance out the window at the long line of cars topped with flashing lights speeding in the opposite direction. The darkness around El’s eyes seems to be fading when he lifts the cloth to check, so as carefully and gently as he can, he uses one corner of the still-damp material to wipe the blood away from her mouth and nose.

Steve deposits her on a bed in an upstairs guest bedroom, heading downstairs to make food in the kitchen after telling Mike that he’s

welcome to move the chair in the corner of the room closer to the bed. Mike settles into the chair slowly, his grip around El's hand regained, listening to her steady breathing and the muffled, distant sounds of Steve working in the kitchen beneath them.

A particularly loud metallic crash - followed by a curse - draws Mike's gaze away from El's face. He's just wondering if he should go down there and check on things when El's fingers suddenly tighten around his hand.

Her eyes are open and shining with confusion when Mike jerks back toward her. "M-Mike?" she whispers hoarsely, and Mike shifts closer, his vision suddenly blurry with unshed tears.

"Hey, El," he squeezes her hand and her eyes rove over his face, like she can't quite believe what she's seeing. "Are you okay?"

Her brows knit together, the corner of her mouth tugging down. "Where - where -"

"It's okay," Mike says as soothingly as he can. "We're safe. We're at Steve's house."

She still looks confused, but a little less so now; she settles back into the bed, sinking into the pillow a little deeper. "Will?"

"He's okay, too. They got the shadow monster out of him."

This seems to settle her even further. The creases between her brows smooth over, her eyelids drooping just a little more. Mike wonders briefly when the last time she got a decent night's sleep was. "Are you...okay?"

She pronounces each syllable carefully, like the question is a foreign one to her tongue, but he can tell by the way she studies him so earnestly that she genuinely understands what it is that she's asking him. A laugh escapes him - bright and loud from the center of his chest - he just can't help it. The whole situation is so ridiculous, after all. After everything she's gone through tonight alone, after what she's endured and been forced to endure over the course of her time on earth, *she's* asking *him* if *he's* okay. "Yeah," he chokes, reaching up

to swipe the back of his free hand across his face, surprised to find his skin wet with tears. “I’m fine. Are you okay?”

She seems to deliberate for a moment, her gaze dropping briefly from his eyes to his lips and back up again, before her face is drawn into a wry half-smile. “I am now.” she murmurs.

He could swear his heart stops beating for just a second.

“I missed you so much while you were gone,” he says quickly, ducking ever closer to her, planting his elbows on the edge of the bed. “I woke up every morning and hoped that you would come back that day. And every time I called you, I - I would tell myself that this would be the time you’d answer, this would be the time you’d tell me that you were okay.”

Faint anguish passes like a shadow over El’s face. “I’m so sorry, Mike,” she whispers.

“It’s okay,” he says quickly, squeezing her hand for reassurance. “It’s okay, really. It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m just...I’m just really glad you’re finally home.”

The anguish fades, replaced with wonder. “Home?” she repeats.

A year ago, he’d launch into as concise a definition as he could, trying to figure out a way to explain the concept using words she knew. A year ago, he might draw a picture of a house with a fence and a big tree out front, one perfect for climbing. A year ago, he’d mistake this repetition as one of miscomprehension.

But it’s not a year ago, it’s now, and in El’s eyes he can clearly see that she’s heard this word before. And for a moment his whole chest aches for her, wondering if the lab and Papa and all the horrors she lived through prior to her escape are tied to the word in her mind, conjuring up images and memories she doesn’t deserve to suffer through. Mike aches for her because she deserves all the good things life has to offer, she deserves love and happiness and safety and joy, all the things that a home should be.

El’s head shifts on the pillow, turning more toward him, and her grip

around his hand grows stronger. “Home.” she repeats, dark gaze boring into his, like she’s cementing a connection in her mind. Mike holds impossibly still, hardly even daring to draw a breath. “Home.”

“Yeah,” he finally breathes, returning some of the pressure to her hand. “You’re home.”

She blinks a few times, swallows thickly. “Mike?” she finally asks.

“Yeah?”

Another smile, this one smaller and more secret, one he likes to think she reserves only for him. “I’m glad I’m home, too.”

Her smile may be small, but the warmth it sparks inside his chest is anything but. He grins down at her, fully aware now of the tears pouring down his face, further from caring than he’s ever been in his life. The last three-hundred and fifty-three days have been hell on earth and the darkness still feels like it’s hanging all around him, but it’s all okay, because Will’s okay and so are the rest of his friends and Mrs. Byers and Hopper and Nancy and Jonathan and Steve, and the monster is gone, and the gate is closed. It’s all okay, finally, *finally*, because Hawkins is safe and they’re all safe and the hole inside Mike’s chest is finally healing because Eleven is alive and she’s here and she’s *home*.

And Hopper can’t hide her from him anymore, and maybe she can come to school with them, and they can go to the Snow Ball together just like he promised, and they’ll all get to be normal for the first time. The future stretches out before them, winding and unhurried, and Mike can see all the promises ahead for the first time in a year.

And it’s so, so good.